



Commander U.S. Pacific Fleet
Navy Ball
Hilton Hawaiian Village
Admiral Patrick M. Walsh
October 17, 2009

Governor, Admiral Hayes, Admiral Macke, General North, fellow Flag and General Officers, Counsels General, Ladies and Gentlemen... (Please help me recognize a life-long friend to Sailors and Marines everywhere and thank Mr. Jim Nabors for that wonderful rendition of our National Anthem...we should recognize and congratulate him for his recent selection as recipient of the American Patriot Award.)

It is a distinct privilege to introduce tonight's guest of honor and participate in this celebration. Thank you for the opportunity to have a role to play in the festivities that commemorate the birthday of our Navy. I have looked forward to this evening for some time because I enjoy any occasion to talk about the men and women who have served on our team.

First, let me say to those on our Pacific Fleet staff that you look sharp and proud. In my long time association with the fleet and my short time here, I have learned to appreciate and live through your success and view the world through your eyes. Andy and I are especially grateful to be here and for the privilege to serve alongside such a dedicated, talented team. Over the course of our lives, we have learned that no matter where we are, no matter where your travels take you, that as long as you are with shipmates and friends, you are at home.

I am particularly grateful to the Navy Ball committee and those who invested so much of themselves into this evening's event. THEY wanted us to have a festive, spirited celebration, one that we would enjoy and remember. WE...want them to know how much their thoughtfulness and personal attention to this event means to us. They all have day jobs – to find time to remember other people during their own personal time is the mark of a great team and first class organization. This is truly a magnificent event.



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Depending on your perspective (as well as your age), birthdays are an opportunity to look forward with an eye to the future or they may be a chance to step back and review events. Anniversaries require us to think ahead, plan, set schedules, and invest our time. If we do not invest ourselves, then the date we celebrate and the event that we commemorate loses its meaning. Tonight we take a moment to remind ourselves of who we are and rededicate ourselves to what we do. Tonight we recognize the prominent role and critical contributions of those who play in the vanguard for freedom.

However, it is important to remember that throughout our personal and professional lives, we have had reminders of just how quickly a strong, youthful, secure, and vibrant life can turn fragile; how a cruel twist of fate can deal a terrible and destructive blow; and, how opportunities to see each other again can fade, grow dim, cold, and final. Solemn observances quietly took place last week to remember the 17 lives lost nine years ago onboard USS COLE. Remembrances will take place next week to commemorate the 241 Marines, sailors, and soldiers assigned to the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit in 1983 while in Beirut, Lebanon. All went to work on those fateful days in October and were certain that they would continue to attend another birthday and cake cutting celebration.

Well shipmates, today, the Navy and Marine Corps is on station and on duty with more resolve, dedication, and commitment to mission than ever before...those on-watch honor us...and tonight we honor them.

The Navy birthday is more than an annual cake-cutting event. This is an opportunity for fellowship, reunion, and renewal. It is your chance, (it is our chance) to restate goals and dreams...so tonight you have come to the right place and you are here at the right time – because on this day and at this moment, all hearts are together at the forefront of freedom.



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We will not take a 'pass' on opportunities to acknowledge the important role and contribution of each other, to say hello, to spend time together, and support the goals and aspirations of each other. If we let this moment slip by, then you risk becoming numb, deaf, and blind to the goodness, richness, and potential of the person sitting next to you. The wonderful and remarkable aspect of our calling is that you never know how fate will test the person next to you, or what great national decisions will fall upon the shoulders of your team, or how the future of the republic will rest upon the judgment of those you have taught, led, and mentored.

Our history teaches us how fate will find you, how forces beyond our imagination will test you, and how much the nation will need you when she calls. Tonight we have the privilege to be with a true patriot from the Pacific theater...someone who answered that call from a place and time in our storied history filled with accomplishment and distinguished performance. He was part of a team of volunteers...some were the kids next door, down the block, up the street, or over on the farm. They joined a team, became Sailors, served the country, and learned about uncommon valor when it was common virtue. They chose a life of consequence and accomplished something extraordinary after leading honest, unassuming, ordinary lives, and in doing so, etched the name of our team in history.

Tonight we are grateful and indeed fortunate to have with us, Chuck Merdinger, who wore the cloth of the nation and was an eyewitness to history during some of our Nation's darkest hours.

"As a youngster, Chuck grew up wanting to go to West Point, but ended up at the Naval Academy...he was a class leader (three striper), helped to design the class ring, was member of the church club, defensive player on the soccer team, played Lacrosse, and was a good natured lad who always squinted at eye charts, had a weakness for hamburgers on Sunday afternoon, and managed to stand high in his class with a



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minimum amount of studying.” He was the eighth midshipman in the history of the Naval Academy selected as a Rhodes Scholar.

Then, after graduation and training, he saw his first ship, the USS Nevada, bombed at Pearl Harbor. While we know the story of Nevada’s heroic attempt to escape the Harbor, CAPT Merdinger’s service did not end on the beach at Hospital Point. He served aboard the USS Alabama – escorting convoys through the “cruel seas” of the North Atlantic; then supporting decisive landing operations in the sweltering South Pacific – near places such as Tarawa.

After World War II, CAPT Merdinger never stopped growing, developing, or improving himself; he continued to serve and crafted a brilliant career as a Civil Engineer... and subsequently earned a PhD; published a book; and, went where his Nation needed him...to places such as Vietnam. In Vietnam, he commanded the Navy’s largest public works organization and thrived in a difficult and dangerous environment...because it was a responsibility that represented his lifetime passion and work...in a word, he was part of an effort that ‘created, improved, and protected. He provided facilities for community living, industry, transportation, and structures; he used the knowledge of mathematical and physical sciences gained by study, experience, and practice, and applied his skills and judgment for the progressive well-being of humanity.’ His legacy was in what he had built and it overshadowed what others had destroyed.

Retirement from the Navy was just another milestone for CAPT Merdinger that he quietly shrugged off without fanfare or ceremony; he continued to serve our Nation in several capacities and rose to be a college president.



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Throughout his life, Chuck Merdinger influenced and inspired the people around him. He is a loving father to four girls – including our own Susan who says that the quality that most defines him and that all most admire is his honesty and commitment to her mother – his wife of 65 years – Mary.

Tonight, we honor a wonderful man for all that he has done for us in the course of a lifetime of service to his fellow man. When you think about this event, remember Chuck Merdinger in the context of the values we consider at the heart of our history and our service to the nation and to each other -- Honor, Courage, and Commitment. It is because of men such as Chuck Merdinger that we have tonight to honor the past and hope for the future. All of us have an opportunity to learn and grow this evening.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honored to present CAPT Charles “Chuck” Merdinger.